DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 177 EA 032 497

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TITLE	No Child Left Behind: Realizing the Vision. Policy Brief.
INSTITUTION	Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, Aurora, CO.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	10p.
CONTRACT	ED-01-CO-0006
AVAILABLE FROM	Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2550 South Parker Road, Suite 500, Aurora, CO 80014. Tel: 303-337-0990; Fax: 303-337-3005; e-mail: info@mcrel.org; Web site: http://www.mcrel.org. For full text: http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/PolicyBriefs/5032PI_PBNCLBBrief.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Program Administration; Resource Allocation; Strategic Planning

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how implementation of four key aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act can move schools closer to raising achievement for all students. These four aspects--accountability and testing, flexible use of federal resources, school choice, and quality teachers and quality teaching--can allow schools and districts to realize the vision behind the act. Accountability is really about assessment, and any type of student assessment should be about gathering a body of evidence on students' learning, using multiple forms of inquiry to assess student knowledge. Regarding funding, federal funding is at a record high, but so are the mandates for public education. States and districts must use resources in the most effective manner, and a key to such use is to reallocate federal and local resources to meet pressing policy and programmatic issues that are most likely to improve student achievement. The third element, school choice, presents many challenges. If parents transfer their children from low-performing schools to high-performing schools, the former will hardly improve and the latter's resources will be stretched. It is essential that schools build parental and community support in their efforts to improve education. Finally, researchers continue to present evidence linking teacher quality with student learning, and many organizations have strengthened teacher preparation to ensure teacher effectiveness. (RJM)

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McREL POLICY brief

April 2003

No Child Left Behind: Realizing the Vision

By Louis Cicchinelli, Barbara Gaddy, Laura Lefkowits, and Kirsten Miller

In January 2002, when President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, legislators on both sides of the aisle described the bill as the most sweeping education reform legislation in decades. Since that time, educators and policymakers in nearly every state have been scrambling to comply with the Act's requirements. However, if the Act's intent to increase and sustain high levels of student achievement is to be realized, educators and policymakers need to find ways not only to comply with the Act but to draw on research and experience in order to keep the focus on improvement efforts already underway. This brief considers how thoughtful implementation of four key aspects of the Act — accountability and testing, flexible use of federal resources, school choice, quality teachers and quality teaching — can move schools closer, not simply to compliance, but to raising achievement for all students.

Accountability and Testing

At the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act is an increased emphasis on accountability. Among other accountability provisions, the law mandates annual testing in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3–8, beginning in the 2005–2006 school year. In addition, states are required to ensure that all subgroups of students make "adequate yearly progress" toward the state's proficient levels of academic achievement in reading and mathematics and that all students meet or exceed the proficient level no later than the end of the 2013–2014 school year.

Thoughtful implementation of four key aspects of the Act can move schools closer, not simply to compliance, but to raising achievement for all students.

Though state-level standardized testing programs can be useful, concerns have emerged that this approach may overshadow the potential value of a more comprehensive approach to assessment. Most forms of standardized, state-level tests provide snapshots of overall school performance and the progress of groups of students. Data from these tests might also be used to make adjustments to curricular programs and to expose gaps in achievement among groups of students. But in order to improve learning for individual students, timely and richer feedback about students' progress toward standards should be gathered from a wide variety of district, school, and classroom assessments.

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Though "assessment" is often equated with a written test, assessment should really be about gathering a body of evidence about students' learning. In addition to multiple-choice and short, student-constructed response items, experienced teachers use essays, oral responses and reports, performance tasks, and portfolios, as well as classroom discussions, student self-assessments, teacher observations, and teacher-student conferences as sources of information about students' learning. As Gaddy, Dean, and Kendall (2002) note, "using different types of assessments throughout a curriculum unit provides more 'windows' into students' learning because students have more than one way to demonstrate their knowledge and skills" (p. 29). This collection of evidence serves as important diagnostic feedback about the progress of individual students, which teachers can continually draw on to make timely decisions about tailoring instruction and learning experiences to ensure that students stay on track — or get on track — to meet high standards.

Since decisions about individual students should not hinge on their performance on a single test — a point widely understood in the education community — it is critically important to augment state assessments with district, school, and classroom assessments, all of which should be aligned with standards. Schools must balance the need for standardized testing for accountability purposes with the need for testing to guide classroom instruction. The effective implementation of a comprehensive assessment system exposes problems, recognizes successes, helps teachers deliver successful interventions when and where they are most needed, and, with appropriate use of the data gathered, better positions schools to ensure the success of every child.

Assessment

Noteworthy Perspectives: Keeping the Focus on Learning (2002), B. B. Gaddy, C. B. Dean, & J. S. Kendall. See www.mcrel.org/topics/noteworthy.asp

The Role of Classroom Assessment in Teaching and Learning (2000), by L. A. Shepard. See www.cresst.org

Though accountability provisions require the continued development of yearly, standards-based, statewide assessments, it is equally important to ensure that an integrated, aligned approach to assessment is in place in order to truly improve student achievement. Educators and policymakers should institute or re-affirm state and local policies that support teachers — those educators who know individual students best — in gathering evidence of students' learning from multiple sources at multiple points over time.

Flexible Use of Resources

Education researchers have long been locked in a debate over the extent to which student performance gains are linked to the level of resources invested. Some have questioned whether allocating additional funds to education influences student achievement at all. Clearly, educating children costs money, and states need funds to implement the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. But, of course, simply spending more doesn't guarantee improved performance.

Nonetheless, though the FY03 appropriations bill passed by Congress in February 2003 increases funding for the No Child Left Behind Act by eight percent over FY02 levels, it still falls $5.3 billion short of the authorized funding levels for the Act. Further, some preliminary estimates indicate that the resources required to implement the legislation are likely to be much higher than the additional funding states will receive. While debates ensue about

precisely how much additional funding is needed to implement the Act's provisions, states must continue their efforts to comply with the legislation.

Federal funding of public education is at a record high, but so are the mandates for public education. The list of program and policy issues states or local districts must attend to includes the development of grade-level standards and assessments, the recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers, provision of transportation to parents who choose to transfer their children out of a low-performing school, and tutoring and other supplemental services to low-income students in low-performing schools.

Using Funds Strategically

Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us (2000), D. Grissmer, A. Flanagan, J. Kawata, & S. Williamson. See www.rand.org

Resource Allocation: Targeting Funding for Maximum Impact (2002), K. Miller. See www.mcrel.org

The challenge states and districts face is to use the resources they do have to undertake the necessary work by capitalizing on the increased funding flexibility provided by the No Child Left Behind Act. This provision of the Act allows states to combine federal funds, such as those designated for teacher professional development and education technology. This provision is designed to give local educators more say in allocating resources to those programs that will best meet their students' needs.

A key to the effective use of available resources is to focus and strategically reallocate federal resources — and, for that matter, local resources — to meet the policy and programmatic issues that are most pressing and that are most likely to improve student achievement. One of the most cost-effective areas of impact appears to be the classroom teaching environment.

In an analysis of the cost-effectiveness of various reform initiatives to enhance student achievement, RAND researchers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000) found that the cost-effectiveness of specific strategies can vary according to the circumstances of a state's students. For instance, in states with high proportions of disadvantaged students, lowering student-teacher ratios in grades 1–4 can lead to a statewide score gain of approximately three percentile points per student, at a statewide per-student cost of $150. To achieve the same gain in a state that serves predominantly middle-SES students, the per-student cost rises to $450. Notably, however, providing teachers with increased funds for instructional materials and other teaching resources at a statewide per-pupil cost of as little as $110 results in the same three percentile-point gain, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the state's students.

Detailing how resources will be allocated along with a timeline for improvement in a strategic plan can help maintain focus; sharing a strategic plan with members of the public can also help build support and strengthen lines of communication. In addition to developing a plan that incorporates the strategic use of resources, districts and schools might consider pooling funds and forming consortia of schools to address common areas of concern. By working together, schools may be able to leverage their funding to achieve a greater impact than they might otherwise.

School Choice

A widely touted provision of the No Child Left Behind Act is that parents of children in schools identified as failing to make adequate yearly progress can transfer their children to a

better performing public school, including a public charter school. "Failing" schools will receive additional technical assistance from their districts and will be required to offer public school choice to their students. In addition, any child who attends a school designated as "persistently dangerous" by the state may transfer to another public school. Local districts must offer more than one choice and provide transportation for the student to the selected school.

The opportunity to move their children to a better or safer school may be an important short-term option for parents; but school choice may prove to be an inadequate long-term solution to the need for large-scale improvement and improved student achievement for several reasons. Removing children from low-performing schools does little to address the underlying problems in the school system itself, and transfers funding that might have been used for school improvement to other public schools. In addition, a large number of student transfers almost certainly will raise issues of capacity for the higher performing schools slated to receive those students. In these cases, the possibility of "subtraction by addition" could become a reality. The overcrowding of currently effective schools is likely to do little to improve low-performing schools and in fact may erode the performance of effective schools. Too, there is some concern that the students who move within the system may not be those who would benefit most from such a transfer. That is, higher achieving students might be more likely to take advantage of the opportunity to make the switch.

Parent-Community-School Partnerships

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education. See www.ncpie.org

Parents as Teachers. See www.patnc.org

Public Agenda. See Public Engagement at www.publicagenda.org

Undoubtedly there are instances in which a particular child's needs cannot be met in a particular school. More often than not, however, what the child may really need is a different learning program. Merely transferring a child to another building is no guarantee that the child's learning needs will be met. In short, school choice does little to empower schools to provide the best education for students in need of help, nor does it help parents make informed decisions about the learning environment that's best for their children.

With regard to this provision of the Act, educators and policymakers can take at least two steps to build parental and community support and forward the momentum of school improvement. Both steps involve viewing this provision as an *opportunity* for improvement, rather than a *roadblock* to improvement.

Both research and experience confirm the positive relationship between increased parent involvement and student achievement. As parent involvement increases, student achievement increases, attendance and classroom behavior improve, and relationships between teachers and parents grow stronger. Thus, policies and practices should be developed or strengthened that encourage and facilitate parent involvement in their children's schooling.

Schools that successfully involve parents create various avenues for participation, from regular informal and formal meetings to community-building activities such as picnics and athletic events. But long-lasting school improvement hinges on shifting from a focus on increasing parent involvement to developing a parent-community-school partnership focused on the goal

of improved student learning. This broader approach requires developing collaborative relationships and ongoing dialogue with parents, but also with local businesses, faith-based organizations, and cultural and social organizations. It means ensuring that parents, board members, community members, and other stakeholders are well informed, but also creating opportunities for them to participate in decision making and to take school leadership roles. It also calls for providing information, guidance, and avenues through which all stakeholders can help enhance the achievement of all students — for example, providing parents and other caregivers with information and education about how to further enhance the home atmosphere to support and extend students' learning at home.

Another, equally important approach is for schools to follow up with parents who do choose to transfer their children to find out more about why they made that choice. What did the new school offer, or seem to offer, that the original school didn't? What attracted them to the school? Further, are there lessons to be learned from the successes of other schools that might contribute to school improvement plans? Obviously, when partnerships with parents are strong and the lines of communication well used, parents are less likely to transfer their children and more likely to work with teachers and school staff to build a more effective system of support and learning for their children.

Quality Teachers and Quality Teaching

Researchers continue to present evidence linking teacher quality with student learning. But as states have focused on complying with the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, teaching that works has received less attention. The Act requires that, by the end of the 2005–2006 school year, all public school teachers who teach core academic subjects must be "highly qualified." To be considered "highly qualified," teachers must be state certified or have passed the state teacher licensing examination and hold a license to teach in the state. In addition, teachers must demonstrate subject-matter competence, either by passing a state test or by holding an academic major in each subject they teach. Teachers may still be certified through alternative routes, assuming that they receive high-quality professional development, are intensively supervised, and demonstrate satisfactory progress toward full certification. However, individuals in alternative certification programs can assume the functions of a teacher for no more than three years before they are fully certified.

A degree, a passing score on a subject-matter test, and certification may be important indicators of teacher ability, but they are only part of the picture. Ensuring that every child meets high academic standards may require more of individual teachers and of the education system as a whole. In short, states may be in compliance with the Act's teacher quality provisions, but this does not guarantee that student achievement will improve. The tasks associated with long-term, sustained success extend from improving the quality of the beginning teacher workforce to ensuring that teachers already in the classroom have the resources and learning opportunities they need to be most effective.

A number of organizations have taken steps to strengthen teacher preparation reform, among them the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). These organizations, and others, have called for

transforming teacher licensure into a performance-based system, in which teachers are required to demonstrate their teaching knowledge and skills through performance-based assessments prior to receiving state licensure. INTASC (1995) model standards, for example, describe what teachers "should know, be like, and be able to do" (p. 6). The emphasis is on the understanding, abilities, and skills teachers develop rather than on the number of courses they take.

Closely tied to a system of performance-based licensing is ongoing professional development that strengthens the capacities of new and veteran teachers alike. To encourage schools and districts to create high-quality programs of professional development, the U.S. Department of Education established the National Awards Program for Model Professional Development. For several years, the award recognized public and private preK–12 schools and districts that engaged their staffs in high-quality professional development resulting in improved teacher effectiveness and student learning. A number of studies of award winners have been undertaken to identify the elements of success that made these programs models for others to emulate. In particular, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, in partnership with McREL, developed a toolkit (Hassel, 1999) that organizes key lessons gleaned from the experiences of some of the award-winning schools and districts into a step-by-step process for developing a high-quality staff development program.

Quality Teachers/Quality Teaching

Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement (2001), R. J. Marzano, D. J. Pickering, & J. E. Pollock. See www.ascd.org

Learning from the Best: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts Based on the National Awards Program for Model Professional Development (1999), E. Hassel. See www.ncrel.org

Levers for Change: Transforming Teacher Preparation (2002), B. C. Hassel, K. Walter, & E. Hayden. See www.mcrel.org

Principles in Action: Stories of Award-Winning Professional Development (2000) [videotape], McREL. See www.mcrel.org

Teachers Who Learn, Kids Who Achieve: A Look at Schools with Model Professional Development (2000), WestEd. See www.wested.org

Policymakers and educators are encouraged to focus their efforts on long-term solutions. In addition to evaluating the utility of developing performance-based systems of licensure, policymakers and educators might consider other ways to enhance the quality of teaching. In particular, policymakers and educators would be well advised to emphasize teachers' pedagogy and skill in using research-based instructional strategies in their teacher development and continuing education programs. In short, it's important to recognize that in order to be truly effective, credentialed professionals must draw on the best teaching strategies available — those demonstrated to work using the most rigorous scientific methods possible.

Shifting the Focus

As states have been moving forward with their efforts to implement the provisions of the Act, much of the focus has been on accountability, and with good reason. The four pillars of the Act — accountability for results, flexible use of federal resources, school choice, and quality teachers and quality teaching — are undergirded by an unmistakable focus on accountability. The consequences and the message are clear: Unless schools raise student achievement, many will face sanctions that may include takeover and reconstitution, more children exiting the system, and a public stamp of "low performing." As U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige declares, "Every child can learn, and we mean it...excuses are not good enough, we need results" (see www.ed.gov).

Each of the core principles of the Act targets an element of a quality education — but in each case, in order to truly be successful in realizing the vision of the No Child Left Behind Act, states must shift their attention beyond mere compliance. Yearly state-wide testing provides information for making broad programmatic changes, but educators and policymakers must also reinforce district, school, and classroom practices and policies designed to gather multiple types of information in multiple ways about the progress of individual students over time. Funding, even limited funding, should be targeted and used strategically to address the most pressing issues in need of improvement. Schools should focus their attention on developing a strong parent-community-school partnership rather than reacting if and when parents choose to move their children to another school. Policies should address teacher quality, but perhaps more important, they should focus on improving the quality of teaching and ensuring that teachers already in the classroom have the resources and learning opportunities they need to be most effective.

The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act parallels what educators have long set their sights on: to equip every child with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in future schooling and in life. By bringing quality research and professional wisdom to bear during implementation of the Act, educators and policymakers can help make this goal a reality.

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This publication has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-01-CO-0006. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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